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ABSTRACT

The Penn State Outing Club at Pennsylvania State University redesigned operational procedures to better address fiscal, managerial, and leadership development concerns. The student-run club dissolved its old divisional structure, centralized operations, and split into two branches: club officers and the apprentice-style Wilderness Instructional Leadership Development Program (WILD). The club is administered by an executive board that oversees a large committee structure: public relations, special events, computer, newsletter, brochure, fundraising, and trail crew committees. The responsibilities of each club officer are listed. In the WILD branch, instructional workshops provide opportunities for inexperienced leaders to learn from seasoned leaders. WILD staff are evaluated by peer review and faculty advisors. Each activity area has an elected activity coordinator, who is also a voting member of the executive board. This paper addresses some of the problems of developing and implementing committee structures and offers some suggestions to effectively manage volunteer, student-run committees. (Author/SAS)

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# Redesigning a Club Structure for the 90's

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## Abstract

The Penn State Outing Club redesigned operational procedures to better able address fiscal, managerial, and leadership development concerns. The Club dissolved its old divisional structure, centralized operation, and split into two branches including: (1) Club officers, and (2) the Wilderness Instructional Leadership Development Program (WILD). The Club is run by an Executive Board that oversees a large committee structure. This paper addresses some of the problems of developing and implementing committee structures and offers some suggestions to effectively manage volunteer student-run committees.

## Introduction

The Penn State Outing Club (PSOC) was formed in 1920 at The Pennsylvania State University. PSOC is currently one of the largest student-run volunteer organizations at the Penn State University Park campus with a current membership of over 1,400 members. The Club annually operates approximately 105 trips and instructional courses for over 1,800 participants. The Club also sponsors several special events including two kayak races and an annual collegiate Mt. Bike race. PSOC has recently centralized its old "divisional" structure and rewrote its constitution to address fiscal, leadership, and liability concerns.

## Old Club Structure

Formerly, the Club operated under a divisional format overseen by an Executive Board. The Executive Board consisted of Divisional Officers, Main Club Officers, and Advisors. Each activity (i.e. kayaking, x-country skiing, rock climbing, etc..) would elect officers that would be responsible for scheduling, training, equipment, and management of divisional funds. Advisors were elected and assigned to the various divisions to help provide activity specific expertise and a level of continuity. As a PSOC member, one could have access to all divisional activities and have voting privileges in

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each.

Many of the problems with this structure are quite obvious. The first problem is leadership. Who actually trains and oversees the leadership aspect of the club as well as the individual divisions? Who determines who leads trips? It was found that in this structure the people that were actually leading the trips were the elected officers for each of the divisions. In essence, someone became "blessed" to lead trips by a simple vote of the membership. The membership base was not at an experience or skill level to be able to determine who would make a good leader. Obtaining a leadership position was reduced to a popularity contest among members.

In the divisional structure, it was the Advisor's role to help maintain a level of consistency and oversee the training of Club leaders. In the current liability climate, it seems that dedicated and qualified Advisors are somewhat unwilling to become involved. Each of the divisions, including the main club, would require an Advisor to oversee the leadership aspect of the Club.

**PSOC Divisional Structure**

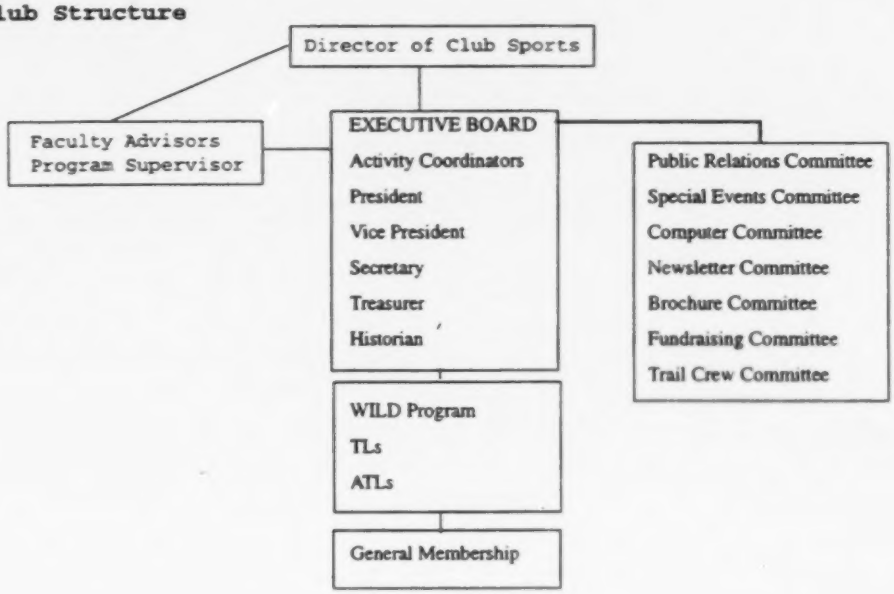
Each division of the Club maintained its own operational budget and officer structure. The divisions became an opportunity for small groups of individuals to get together and finance "personal" trips. There were very few introductory activities that allowed for skill development among the general membership. The emphasis was on advanced level trips. Cliques developed within each of the divisions and created an "us against them" mentality; the true definition of "division".

## New Club Structure

To address fiscal and managerial concerns the Club sought to centralize its operational structure. A student-run committee, overseen by the Faculty Advisors and the Program Supervisor, designed a new structure for the Club. The Club dissolved the divisional format and divided into two leadership branches; (1) Club Officers, and (2) the Wilderness Instructor Leadership Development Program (WILD). The Club Officers are elected by the general membership of the Club. Their responsibilities are to manage the administrative functions of the club. The individuals involved in the WILD program are

involved in field leadership and the development of course/trip curriculum.

**New Club Structure**




The officers of the Club serve several administrative functions as well as oversee several student committees. The responsibilities are as follows:

**President**:
Organize and develop general membership meetings
Organize and develop agenda for the Executive Board Meetings
Oversee **Public Relations** Committee
Oversee **Special Events** Committee

**Vice President**:
Help to facilitate Co-op involvement
Collect of information for e-mail postings
Oversee the **Computer** Committee

**Secretary**:
Maintain executive board meeting minutes
Maintenance of staff and membership data bases
Oversee the **Newsletter** committee
Oversee the **Brochure** committee

**Treasurer**:
Document all financial transactions
Develop activity area budgets

Process all vehicle and room requests
Oversee the **Fundraising** committee

**Historian:**
Update and maintain the Club Slide show
Collect all PSOC publications and articles
Photograph all PSOC events
Oversee the **Trail Crew** committee

WILD is an apprentice style leadership development system where inexperienced leaders learn from seasoned Trip Leaders (TLs). Educational and training opportunities exist in the form of instructional workshops that are required of both Assistant Trip Leaders (ATLs) and TLs. As the leaders become more comfortable in their leadership style, they can assume greater responsibility. WILD staff are evaluated by a peer review system as well as by the Program Supervisor and Faculty Advisors. Each Activity Area maintains an Activity Coordinator (AC) that is elected by the TLs of the Activity Area. The AC is responsible for scheduling staff, planning trips, overseeing staff training, curriculum development, and helping to maintain effective documentation of courses and trips. ACs are also voting members of the Executive Board.

## The Committee Structure

A student-run committee structure can be a very powerful and useful tool for outdoor organizations. It is a way in which students can channel their energy, contribute their area of expertise, and become empowered to make real and relevant contributions to the organization's success. This can also provide an excellent resume builder and a way for students to gain valuable hands-on experience.

When developing a committee structure, PSOC benchmarked several other successful student-run organizations at Penn State University including the IFC Panhellenic Dance Marathon Committee. The Dance Marathon is an annual event that is run by a 13 member student committee. The proceeds from this event benefit cancer research and the Four Diamonds Fund at PSU's Hershey Medical Center. The dance marathon is an annual event that generates over 1.3 million dollars for cancer research. The 13 member committee organizes over 1,200 volunteers and 540 dancers in this 3 day event. The Dance Marathon, by any measuring stick, is an incredibly successful event that is 100% student run.

## Problems with Volunteers and Student-Run Committees

PSOC has discovered several problems developing and implementing effective volunteer student committees. The first and foremost problem is how to get people excited about volunteering their time to the organization? How do you get people excited about making flyers, advertising, and making phone calls? PSOC has also found that since all of the volunteers are full-time students it is difficult to achieve a high level of commitment. It seems to be very easy to get folks to sign-up for committees but a problem to get them to actually show up for the first meeting. Committee members can also become bogged down in academic commitments that take precedence over "extracurricular" activities.

PSOC offers the opportunity for students to contribute their area of expertise in a forum which allows them to develop their professional skills. On occasion, PSOC has to settle for something less than "professional" quality. After all, working on projects is part of the learning process and can be viewed as an experiential extension of the classroom, however, at what point does the administrator draw the "quality" line? When is it better in the long run just to hire a professional?

PSOC often asks people to represent our organization and work in conjunction with outside agencies. Students (as well as professionals) can make mistakes and can misrepresent the organization. At what point does a volunteer working for the organization get positive feedback, negative feedback, scolded, or reprimanded. After all, they are "just a volunteer". Careful consideration and framing of constructive criticism is essential. Volunteer's feelings are easily bruised and subsequently volunteers can be easily lost. Some of these issues can be very trying for professional staff and a challenge to find creative and effective solutions.

## Effective Volunteer Management

Although student-run committees can be a very powerful tool to help run the day-to-day administrative functions of your organization, they can be problematic and may require a different management approach. PSOC has found several techniques and strategies to effectively manage student-run committees.

Spell out duties. Spell out exact responsibilities and brainstorm deadlines for projects. Each position should have a title as well as written duties and responsibilities. Committees need to have exact expectations and goals defined at the very first meeting. Every person needs something to do. If committees are not actively working on projects they quickly fall apart.

Create a "realness" to the position. PSOC requires that students go through an application process that includes a resume, essay questions, and interviews from both peers and the Program Supervisor. This process creates an atmosphere of competition and weeds out some of the less committed folks.

Create an aura around the position. People feel a sense of empowerment, status, and accomplishment by competing in the application process. Hype-up the position!!! People on committees need to have the power to be creative and to make relevant decisions.

Offer perks. The biggest perk is the ability to have real and relevant experience to add to a resume. Staff can also get equipment discounts at local sponsors and special equipment rental privileges.

Tangible Benefits: Volunteers need to see a connection between the work that they are doing and a benefit to either themselves or to the organization.

Open and honest communication. It is essential to have effective two-way communication. Develop a committee e-mail, phone, and address list as soon as possible.

Never take advantage of your committees and volunteer staff. Never ask anyone to do anything you would not do yourself and never ask anyone to do anything you have not done yourself. You can make exceptions to this rule if it is an area of technical expertise (i.e. www page, etc...).

Develop a method of evaluation. Plan a feedback and evaluation meeting with the committees to help improve operational effectiveness.

Thank yous and kudos. A heart felt "thank you" sure goes a long way in making everybody happy!!

Don't be "wishy-washy": Help volunteers to brainstorm their own deadlines and help them to assume ownership of the project. Hold people to deadlines and responsibilities and if they cannot "tow-the-line" find someone who can.

## Conclusion

The Penn State Outing Club restructured and centralized its operational structure to better able address fiscal, managerial, and leadership development concerns. The student-run committee structure implemented at PSOC has proven to be a very powerful administrative tool. Although somewhat diffi-

cult to manage, student-run committees can be very useful to other outdoor organizations. This paper provided a few suggestions for managing student-run committees. By keeping a few simple rules in mind, student-run committees can be a very effective and rewarding experience for the volunteer as well as the outdoor professional.